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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 000179

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STATE FOR EUR DAS BRYZA, EUR/CARC, AND EUR/RPM

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/22/2018

TAGS: PREL PGOV MOPS GG

SUBJECT: DAS BRYZA'S 19 JANUARY MEETING WITH GEORGIAN DEFENSE MINISTER DAVIT KEZERASHVILI

Classified By: Ambassador John Tefft, reason 1.4(b), and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Georgian Defense Minister Davit Kezerashvili told DAS Matthew Bryza at a 19 January meeting that Georgia still hopes to achieve a Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the upcoming Bucharest NATO summit. Kezerashvili argued that failure to meet this goal before the spring 2008 Georgian parliamentary elections could undermine domestic support for the Georgian government's pro-NATO policy and boost those opposition leaders who prefer Georgia adopt a policy of neutrality. He also implied that it could hurt the government's ability to justify the continued deployment of troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Kezerashvili expressed concern that the expected recognition of Kosovo's independence could prompt Russia to recognize Abkhazia in response, with dangerous consequences. He also stressed the importance of Azerbaijani gas exports to help Europe diversify its sources of supply away from Gazprom. End Summary.

Georgia Should Join NATO Sooner, Not Later

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¶2. (C) At a 19 January meeting with DAS Bryza and Ambassador Tefft, Kezerashvili contended that increasing European dependence on Russian natural gas is driving a parallel increase in Russian influence in Europe. As a result, he predicted that it will only become more difficult for Georgia to gain NATO membership over time, as European countries become less inclined to alienate Russia, their principal energy supplier. As a result, Kezerashvili argued that if Georgia is not offered a MAP at Bucharest, it will be a significant setback, although he admitted it would "not be a disaster."

Cooperation is a Two-Way Street

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¶3. (C) Kezerashvili speculated that without MAP, it would become harder domestically for Georgia to cooperate with NATO, as it would become more difficult to justify deployments with NATO countries. The government's arguments that such deployments help achieve NATO membership would be vulnerable to opposition critics in the spring 2008 parliamentary elections. He added that it would also become more difficult to explain to the families of Georgian soldiers killed or wounded in Iraq why their sons had made such sacrifices. Without a MAP, the Georgian government could likewise lack sufficient domestic support for sending troops to support NATO operations in Afghanistan, concluded Kezerashvili.

MOD: Europeans Block Georgian MAP

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¶4. (C) DAS Bryza reiterated strong U.S. support for Georgia's NATO aspirations. He noted that the November 7 street violence in Tbilisi had led many European countries to

question Georgia's progress towards democracy, making the adoption of a MAP at Bucharest unlikely. The January 2008 presidential election partly restored Georgia's democratic credentials, but Bryza noted that significant flaws in the election left a negative impression, which could be corrected with parliamentary elections in the spring that meet international standards. Kezerashvili complained that some European countries--he cited Germany, Bulgaria, Greece, and the Netherlands--would use any excuse to delay NATO membership for Georgia. These countries, Kezerashvili contended, shy from conflict with Moscow because of their dependence on Russian natural gas. DAS Bryza responded that the United States would continue to lobby European members of NATO for rapid Georgian accession as Georgia met NATO membership criteria. The best way for Georgia to sway these European critics, argued Bryza, is for the spring 2008 Georgian parliamentary elections to represent an improvement in democratic procedure over the presidential elections. Bryza explained U.S. energy security strategy, which relies on increased exports of Azerbaijani natural gas through the Nabucco and Turkey-Greece-Italy pipelines to help Europe reduce its dependence on Gazprom.

MOD Predicts Russian Recognition of Abkhazia

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¶5. (C) Kezerashvili predicted that Russia would use the expected recognition of Kosovo as an excuse to recognize Abkhazia in retaliation. In response to DAS Bryza's comments that many in Moscow recognize the potential costs to Russia of recognizing Abkhazia, especially in the North Caucasus, Kezerashvili said that Russia would feel "trapped" into recognizing Abkhazia. If Moscow did not recognize Abkhazia, he concluded, Russia would "lose" Abkhazia, forcing Russia into recognition. He also expressed certainty that Moscow would not miss the opportunity to complicate the run-up to

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the spring 2008 Georgian parliamentary elections by such recognition.

¶6. (U) DAS Bryza has cleared this message.  
TEFFT